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Military Times

Clandestine Somalia missions yield AQ targets — The third in a series looking at U.S. military operations in the Horn of Africa after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks

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Starting in 2003, small teams of U.S. operatives would clamber aboard a civilian turboprop plane at a Nairobi, Kenya, airfield to embark on one of the most dangerous missions conducted by

U.S. personnel in Somalia since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

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The teams combined CIA case officers and "shooters" from a secretive special operations unit sometimes called Task Force Orange, said an intelligence source with long experience in the Horn of Africa. "There were always at least two CIA case officers, and there were always at least two shooters," the source said. "Everybody was armed."

Those first secret missions were all about gathering human intelligence — "collecting information, validating information," said the source. But they soon expanded to include working with warlords to hunt al-Qaida members, tapping cellphones, purchasing anti-aircraft missiles and, ultimately, developing a deeper understanding of al-Qaida's East African franchise and how it fit into the wider al-Qaida network.

The Mogadishu missions became one of the most successful U.S. intelligence operations in the Horn.

The teams would hop a commercial flight that departed Nairobi every morning bringing the day's supply of khat — the plant whose leaves are chewed as a narcotic stimulant by Somali men — to the Somali capital of Mogadishu, the intelligence source said.

"The safest flight you can be on in Somalia is the khat flight," the source said.

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The plane would land at the K50 airport, about 50 kilometers southwest of Mogadishu.

The operatives set out to build relationships with the warlords who had held sway in Somalia for the previous 12 years in hopes of enlisting the warlords in their manhunt for the members of al-Qaida in East Africa. That organization had been responsible for the Aug. 7, 1998, bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and it remained a potent threat in the eyes of some U.S. officials.

Since al-Qaida's eviction from Afghanistan in late 2001, U.S. intelligence had tracked personnel and money moving from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region to the Horn of Africa with growing alarm.

But with the ill-fated 1992-1994 U.S. military intervention in Somalia fresh in policymakers' minds, there was no appetite in Washington for committing significant numbers of troops to the country.

"The United States still has a hangover from 'Black Hawk Down,' " the intelligence source said, in a reference to the book and movie about the October 1993 Battle of Mogadishu that cost the lives of 18 U.S. soldiers — almost all of whom were part of a Joint Special Operations Command task force.

"Nobody had the stomach for it," agreed a special ops source with firsthand knowledge of military operations in the Horn.

Instead, the CIA ran the U.S. effort against al-Qaida in East Africa out of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi. But the name given to the venture was a deliberate reference to the 1993 battle: "Operation Black Hawk." John Bennett, the agency's highly respected Nairobi station chief, was in charge, said the intelligence source with long experience in the Horn. (Bennett now heads the CIA's National Clandestine Service and is no longer under cover. He declined to be interviewed for this series.)

Operation Black Hawk's aim was to kill or capture the 20 or so main members of the al-Qaida cell in East Africa. But rather than use U.S. forces to do this, the CIA's plan would have Somali warlords capture the al-Qaida personnel before turning them over to the U.S. to send — or "render" — them to an American ally or one of the agency's secret prisons, said sources who served in the region.

From 2001 on, U.S. operations in the Horn "were focused on extraordinary rendition," said the intelligence source with long experience there. "Extraordinary rendition" means "you're going to deliver that person to a foreign country and/or use foreign assets — a surrogate force — to conduct the operation," the source said.

Thus small teams composed of CIA case officers, TF Orange special operators and what a senior intelligence official called "really high-end interpreters" would land at K50 and travel to and through Mogadishu in small convoys escorted by fighters loyal to one warlord or another. The convoys' routes crossed the boundaries between several warlords' territories, so a lot of coordination was required between the U.S. personnel and the warlords and among the warlords themselves, according to the intelligence source.

Key to the missions was Bennett, the experienced station chief who "was very professional," said the special ops source with firsthand experience of military operations in the Horn. "He's a really unbelievable team player," said the senior intelligence official.

Bennett did not go on the missions because, according to the intelligence source with long experience in the Horn, "[He] didn't need to — it was unnecessary risk." But his personality was critical to the effort. "The relationship with the warlords was built through ... Bennett," said the source. "It was through his sheer willpower and force of personality. He could do it and nobody else could."

Bennett laid down some ground rules for operating in Somalia, the intelligence source said. These included:

- "We will work with warlords."
- "We don't play favorites."
- "They don't play us."
- "We don't go after Somali nationals, just [foreign] al-Qaida."

The last stipulation was key because "the warlords were in it just for the money," the intelligence source said. "They had no problems knocking out non-Somalis."

(However, this rule applied only to operations conducted by, with and through the warlords, the source said. It did not apply to U.S. "unilateral efforts," nor to bilateral operations with the Kenyans, which in each case sometimes targeted Somali Islamist militants.)

The CIA worked with "just about all" the warlords, said the intelligence source. "The warlords really didn't have a dog in the fight," the source added.

The Americans used a carrot-and-stick approach, offering the warlords cash if they helped, with the implicit threat of U.S. air power if they didn't.

"They were risky missions," the intelligence source said. "You could never actually trust the warlords — they're subject to the highest bidder. That's why we wanted to have that stick."

But the warlords' fear of being whacked by U.S. air power was groundless. There were no U.S. aircraft overhead.

"We really didn't have a stick," the source said. "Not in a hundred years. But it worked."

At first the CIA-TF Orange teams would fly in and out of Somalia on the same day, but as their relationships with the warlords became more comfortable, they began visiting at least once a week and staying overnight in the Somali capital, the source said. Those relationships were paying off by late 2003, when the CIA persuaded Mohammed Farah Aided Jr., the warlord son of the late militia leader whose forces the U.S. military had fought in 1993, to sell it 37 SA-7 and four SA-18 man-portable surface-to-air missiles, according to the special ops source.

"The 18s were brand-new, in a crate," he said.

The intelligence source with long experience in the Horn confirmed that Aided Jr. provided the CIA with "about 40" surface-to-air missiles. "To this day I don't clearly understand what his motives were, but it worked for us," the intelligence source said.

Both sources said the CIA paid Aided Jr. about \$360,000, which the intelligence source described as "peanuts," for the missiles, any one of which could bring down a civilian airliner. After the agency bought them, the missiles were stored briefly at an arms depot at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, before an Air Force C-17 flew them away, the special ops source said.

## Cellphone monitoring

Working with the warlords required extraordinary care and judgment.

"Much of what the warlords told us was true," the intelligence source said. But, the source added, before running operations against targets based on what the warlords had told them, U.S. intelligence and special ops personnel always checked that information against what unilateral spies being run by U.S. intelligence said.

In an effort to develop targets, the CIA, supported by TF Orange, ran a series of missions into Mogadishu to "seed" the city with

devices that monitored cellphone traffic, according to a senior military official. This required repeated trips to Mogadishu, said the senior military and intelligence officials.

"You've got to reposition [the devices] as they add cellphone towers or reposition them," the military official said.

These missions allowed the Orange personnel to come into their own. Close-in signals intelligence is an Orange specialty, but on the first forays into Mogadishu, the Orange personnel, who were "really good ground tactical guys," functioned primarily as security, said the intelligence source with long experience in the Horn.

"Initially the Orange guys were strictly protection, [although] they always thought their role was much larger," the source said. The missions to install the monitoring gear allowed them to put their unique skills to use.

(The "Orange" name comes from the color code traditionally assigned to the Fort Belvoir, Va.-based special mission unit's personnel when they formed part of a larger Joint Special Operations Command task force. The unit has gone by many other names, including the Intelligence Support Activity and the Mission Support Activity, and is often referred to by JSOC insiders simply as "the Activity" or "Orange.")

While the Orange troops were on the missions because of their technical expertise, the CIA personnel were the ones talking to the warlords.

"They knew these guys," the senior intelligence official said.

"They were in charge of the handling [of the warlords], any kind of negotiations that were being done. It was a good relationship, actually."

## 'Hundreds of bad guys'

In a country in which any operation carried major risks, "some of these sensitive missions in downtown Mogadishu" were the most

dangerous carried out by U.S. personnel in Somalia during the past 10 years, said the intelligence official.

"We could have had two or three U.S. citizens [taken prisoner] and they could still be held hostage today," the official said. "And there would have been no doubt who they were or what they were."

No aircraft monitored these missions.

"We had very, very few imagery assets available — everything was still dedicated to Iraq," the official said.

That left each team of operatives reliant on shaky deals with ruthless warlords in an anarchic city of roughly 2 million overrun by competing militias.

"All these bad guys had not a couple of bad guys with them but hundreds of bad guys with them," said a military targeting official. "If you put somebody in there ... you're going to be in the middle of hundreds of bad guys almost instantaneously, and if you don't have this thing just absolutely soup to nuts, you're probably going to wind up with a lot of dead people, including friendlies, including our guys. You could never quite get around that."

But unbeknownst to all but a few not directly involved, there was a force ready to come to the rescue, in case the teams in Mogadishu got into trouble. That force was the Joint Special Operations Task Force - Horn of Africa, based at Lemonnier.

Led by Col. Rod Turner, a Special Forces officer, the force was tasked to be prepared to conduct personnel recovery missions, code named Mystic Talon missions, in the event that the CIA/JSOC forays into Mogadishu ran into problems, according to a special operations source with firsthand knowledge of operations in the Horn.

If the order came to launch the rescue force, the task force's four Air Force special operations MH-53 Pave Low helicopters would



take off carrying as many members as possible of the Special Forces company assigned to Central Command's Crisis Response Element, a special ops force available to Turner for certain missions. That company was a commander's in-extremis force, or CIF, company, which is specially trained and resourced for direct-action missions.

Each Pave Low was manned by a crew of six and equipped with an air-to-air refueling probe, rapid-firing mini-guns in the doors and a .50-cal machine gun mounted on the tail.

"They were flying arsenals but with this big layer of armor blankets in them," the special ops source said.

But the weight of that armor, plus the heat of Somalia, severely limited the number of SF soldiers who could take part in the mission. That number also depended on how many personnel needed to be rescued: the more Americans in trouble on the ground, the fewer SF troops the helicopters could carry. Most scenarios for which the task force planned would see about six SF soldiers — and no more than 10 — aboard each helicopter, the special ops source said.

"It would be based on the information provided at the time of notification," the special ops source said.

If the message from the team on the ground was, "We are decisively engaged, we can't get out of where we're at, and we need as much firepower as we can to save our lives," then the priority for the rescue force would be to put as many guys on the ground as possible, rather than "getting in and extracting them," the source said.

In such a worst-case scenario, the thinking went, "maybe we can get a ship up the shore or something and get something in off the ship," he said.

On the other hand, the special ops source said, "If it was, 'Hey, we're hauling ass, heading west, there'll be five of us,' then it

would probably be maybe a five-man package per bird. Just something to go in, lay down a quick base of fire, go in and pull these guys out and then leave."

In addition, Turner ordered that plenty of space be left on the helicopters in case one or more of them did not make it back, and the task force planned every personnel recovery mission with the requirement that it could still be accomplished if a helicopter was lost.

"The plan was to launch all four with the expectation that [the task force] would have to do self-recovery if one of them went down," the special ops source said. "When that aircraft went down, one aircraft would have to stop and pick them up and would turn around and bring them home. So you basically have maxed out that aircraft if you have five or six SF guys on it and a crew of five guys. ... [We're then] sticking another 10 guys on an already almost overloaded airplane, trying to limp it back to Djibouti. So it was a very slim package."

If two helicopters went down, the mission would be aborted, but everyone on the four outbound helicopters flights would fit on the remaining two, if need be, according to the special ops source.

As it was, despite the extraordinary risk involved, no mission into Mogadishu ran into the sort of trouble that required the rescue force from Djibouti.

## Key targets

The ability to listen to al-Qaida in East Africa's phone calls paid big dividends.

"It [the phone monitoring] definitely led to us being able to have much more precise information about what was going on, what actually was happening," the senior intelligence official said.

"Those operations gave us pretty good insight into what al-Qaida

was doing in East Africa. ... They saw it as another safe haven, they saw the opportunity to establish training camps and they did.

And it allowed us to start to plan CT [counterterrorism]-like operations against a couple of the key targets."

Those targets included Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, one of the original al-Qaida in East Africa leaders, as well as two senior figures in Somalia's al-Qaida-linked al-Shabaab militia: Aden Hashi Ayro, who allegedly trained in al-Qaida's Afghanistan camps, and Ahmed Abdi Godane, the group's leader from 2009 to 2010, according to the intelligence official. (After Ayro was killed in a 2008 cruise missile strike, al-Shabaab reportedly suspected the U.S. had tracked him via his iPhone and banned the use of similar devices.)

But monitoring al-Shabaab and al-Qaida phone traffic did more than help U.S. intelligence officials with their manhunts. It also gave them a deeper understanding of how interlinked some of the violent Islamist groups were, according to the intelligence official.

"There were [telephone] communications between Pakistan and Somalia," the official said. "It was the communicators for the key [al-Qaida] guys [in Pakistan], and also from Yemen and from Iraq and from North Africa. So we really saw this blossoming of their network start to grow, and that's really, really when we began to realize just how much they were franchising the movement out of Pakistan. And all these guys, all these leaders, at one time or another, all met in the training camps of Afghanistan. And, to a degree, some — not many — met with bin Laden when he was in his days in Sudan."

The phone-monitoring gear is probably still operating, the intelligence official said.

"I've got to believe it's still there, because it was a pretty capable system," the official said, adding that now, "It's probably better."

However, the official said, publishing the history of the cellphone monitoring system would not compromise ongoing operations. The targets in Somalia know their phone conversations are being

monitored, but unlike their counterparts in Pakistan's tribal areas, they are not constantly reminded of the dangers of using their phones.

"They're not hearing the Predators overhead all the time," the intelligence official said. "It's like guys in Iraq and Afghanistan — they know it ... [but] they can't help themselves."

(However, the intelligence source with long experience in the Horn said that the al-Qaida cell began to move its communications to the Internet. And with reports that the U.S. is increasing its drone activity around the Horn, Islamists in Somalia may soon become more aware of Predators overhead.)

## Training camps

Not all U.S. intelligence efforts were aimed at Mogadishu. American operatives were also interested in potential al-Qaida activity in Ras Kamboni, a coastal town about two miles from the Kenyan border. In the first years after 9/11, there were persistent rumors of al-Qaida training camps in the town.

"We were throwing people at Ras Kamboni ... in late '01, early '02," the intelligence source with long experience in the Horn said. Then interest in the town abated before picking up again in late 2003 to early 2004, when U.S. personnel flew over Ras Kamboni but saw no sign of any training camps, the source said.

In addition, case officers in the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi "ran numerous unilateral assets against" Ras Kamboni, the source said. These were "Somalis who had businesses in the region, Somalis who had reason to be there," the source said. "People we could depend on."

The U.S. paid the spies roughly \$1,000 to \$2,000 a month to enter southern Somalia and report what they observed. But even these local hires found little evidence of al-Qaida in Ras

Kamboni, according to the source.

It was not until 2007 that the U.S. became convinced that "hundreds" of fighters were training in camps in and around Ras Kamboni, the senior intelligence official said. "We observed two that had at least 150 personnel per [at any one time]," the official said.

Al-Qaida in East Africa's tentacles spread beyond Somalia. The group's "center of gravity" was clearly Mogadishu, "but there was a huge support cell split between Nairobi and Mombasa," a port city in Kenya, said the intelligence source with long experience in the Horn.

However, the source added, it wasn't clear whether al-Qaida in East Africa was planning attacks in Nairobi or whether its presence in the Kenyan capital was a holdover from the 1990s.

"We were tracking several targets in Nairobi," the source said. "A lot of our operations in Nairobi were technical operations — phones and computers."

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